

My Voice™ K-2 Focus Groups

For over twenty years, the staff of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) has been asking students about their perceptions of their school. QISA's My Voice Survey asks students to assess their school using indicators based on the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference® — Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action. Among the many things that are measured in schools today, the voice of all participants must be at the forefront if positive change is to be adopted, implemented, and sustained. Due to their unreliability, QISA does not use scaled surveys with students in grade 2 or younger; rather, QISA encourages schools to conduct focus groups with this population.

Conducting Focus Groups

Focus groups allow younger students an opportunity to share their thoughts on school. Groups should consist of 4-5 students who naturally get along with each other. Do not mix grade levels unless the students know each other or are in a multiage setting. In general, younger students will not share negative thoughts with their classroom teacher in a focus group setting. Younger students are loyal to their teachers and it is often more useful to have a trusted outsider (e.g., someone who teaches in another grade level) engage students in these conversations.

Some guidelines:

- Be cautious of asking questions that only collect yes/no responses or questions that confuse the students.
- Encourage students to share stories and examples, rather than overwhelming them with questions. Allow group interaction and conversations.
- From such interactions, search for themes related to the 8 Conditions.
- Ensure the setting is comfortable and nonthreatening for all students.
- Be certain all students understand the purpose of the focus group *before* pulling them from the classroom.

Formulating Questions

The questions below are samples and not intended to be used in a single focus group setting.

Self-Worth: *Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment*

To better understand K-2 perceptions of Self-Worth, questions should elicit responses about friends, how people treat each other, what students feel is important to learn at school, and what accomplishments make them proud. Keep in mind that kindergarteners might need examples and more direct questions, whereas second graders can tell stories and give examples to support their response.

Providing Younger Students with a Meaningful Voice

Sample questions:

- *Tell* me how students treat each other at school. Are they nice? How could they be nicer?
- When someone is different at school (they wear different clothes, they speak differently), *how* do other students treat them?
- *How* do you know that your teacher likes you?
- *How* are adults helpful and nice to you at school? What could adults do to make school a better place for you?
- *What* do you think you are good at doing in school?
- *Give* me an example of a time you tried really hard at school.

Active Engagement: *Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure*

To better understand student perceptions of Active Engagement, questions should elicit responses about what students find exciting to learn, students' level of comfort in asking questions, opportunities students have to imagine, dream, and create, as well as questions pertaining to how students feel about making mistakes and learning from their mistakes.

Sample questions:

- *Tell* me about a lesson that you really enjoyed at school. Why did you enjoy it?
- *When* is school fun for you? *When* is school not fun?
- *How* do you use your imagination at school?
- *What* do you find boring at school? Why?
- *When* do you ask questions at school?
- *What* happens if you make a mistake doing school work? How do you feel about mistakes?

Sense of Purpose: *Leadership & Responsibility, Confidence to Take Action*

To better understand student perceptions of Sense of Purpose, questions should elicit responses about how students are leaders at school, when they are encouraged to make decisions, and their overall confidence in themselves.

Sample questions:

- *Tell* me about a student who is a leader at school. What makes this student a leader?
- *How* are you a leader at school?
- *What* types of decisions do you make during the school day?
- *What* would you like to learn by the end of the school year?
- *Do* you know anyone that goes to college? What do you think about college?
- *What* would you like to be when you get older?